

WHO IS A MORON?

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THE answer to this question is of general as well as scientific interest. The term "moron" originally brought into the language for specific scientific use seems to have filled a long-felt want in the public mind, and to-day one meets it in polite conversation, in popular literature of all kinds, from newspapers to novels and poetry, as well as in scientific writings.

The origin of the term is briefly stated. There have been for many years at least three different terms commonly used to apply to persons of defective mentality. These were idiot, imbecile and feeble-minded. Each in its turn had originally been applied as a very kindly designation of mentally deficient people. Idiot, which sounds so harsh to-day, was originally taken over from the Greek language "idiotes," meaning having an individuality of his own, or in a sense peculiar, not an obnoxious term to be applied to a serious mental defective. But of course in time it came to take its meaning from that to which it was applied. Likewise, imbecile, which means literally leaning upon a staff or needing support, was also a friendly term. Still more recently, the expression feeble-minded has come to be applied to these people with the result that it is coming to be a little unpleasant in its implication.

In 1909, the American Association for the Study of the Feeble-minded appointed a committee to devise a classification for the feeble-minded. The writer was a member of that committee and made the report which was presented a year later at the annual meeting held at

Lincoln, Illinois. The Binet-Simon tests of intelligence with their age grading had just come into use and it seemed feasible to use the terms already referred to for defectives of different age levels. Accordingly, the plan presented was to call those defectives who had no higher intelligence than that of two-year-old children, idiots; while those who had intelligence from three years to seven years, inclusive, were to be called imbeciles. So far, so good. There was, however, a third group with a mentality of from eight to twelve. It was at first thought that we could call them feeble-minded. This indeed is the custom in England, but unfortunately for our plan, in the United States the term feeble-minded had come to be applied generically to the entire group of mental defectives and every state institution in the country was called an institution for the feeble-minded. It was obviously too late to restrict the use of the term feeble-minded to the highest group. The only thing that could be done was to keep the term feeble-minded in its generic sense as covering the entire group of mental defectives and to select a new term for this highest group. Various words or expressions were tried, such as "deviates" "the almos'ts" and several others, none of which seemed to have the right sound.

The term "fool" in its good old English signification seemed to be exactly what we wanted. The definition given is "one lacking in common sense, in judgment, or in intelligence." But, good as the term was in old English and fitting exactly the group, it is nevertheless taboo

in modern usage. But no such objection existed for its Greek equivalent "moron." Moreover, fortunately the Greek root "moros" has not been brought into English, except in two words, and it is compounded in each case with another word. The rhetorical term "Oxymoron" is applied to an expression that sounds foolish, but in reality is very witty or sharp "oxus." And, secondly, it appears in the word sophomore, which was a comic word coined years ago by college men to apply to the second-year class, the "sophos," meaning wise, indicating what they thought of themselves, and "moron," meaning foolish, what the upper classmen thought of them. These usages would have no effect upon our proposed use of the term. Consequently, our highest group of the feeble-minded was called "moron" in the report of this committee on classification. The report was accepted by the association and the classification adopted.

It will be noted that according to this a moron is a feeble-minded person who has a mental age of anywhere from eight to twelve years. But as already indicated the public has found the term so useful that it is being used indiscriminately and without regard to its original definition. As used to-day, it is applied to anybody who is a little bit dull in intelligence, or even, as some one has expressed it, to any one who does not agree with you. Most people to whom the term is applied in this broad sense of rather dull or stupid probably have an intelligence of not more than twelve years. Now if all such people were really feeble-minded, there would be no difficulty in the matter. But unfortunately for this problem, such is not the case. There was a time to be sure when we rather thoughtlessly concluded that all people who measured twelve years or less on the Binet-Simon scale were feeble-minded. However, we had already

begun to discover our error when the war came on.

The war led to the measurement of the intelligence of the drafted army, with the result that such an enormous proportion was found to have an intelligence of twelve years and less that to call them all feeble-minded was an absurdity of the highest degree.

Three years ago, William Allen White published an article with the caption, "What is the matter with America?" His answer to his own question was in brief, "The moron majority." According to the army results he was not far from right, if we take the term "moron" to include all the twelve-year intelligences—and add a few of the thirteen years. Of 1,700,000 soldiers tested, forty-five per cent. did not get above the twelve-year limit. Inasmuch as 1,700,000 men were a fair sample of the entire population, we conclude that these figures hold for the people of the country. But if a moron is a *feeble-minded* person, it is evident that these people are not morons. To put the question another way: some people with ten-year intelligence or eleven-year or twelve-year *are* morons, but the great mass of that group *are not* morons. Now what are the distinguishing marks? We shall discover before we are through that the answer to that question raises several others of considerable importance, even involving the interpretation of the laws by which we take care of the feeble-minded persons in state institutions. If a moron is a feeble-minded person, then are not all persons with a ten-year mentality, for example, morons or feeble-minded? To answer we must first ask the question, "Who are feeble-minded?"

And now must our nakedness be exposed! In this year of grace, nineteen hundred and twenty-six, after three quarters of a century of dealing with the problem and at least a quarter of a

century of intensive study of it, we are still limited to a definition of feeble-mindedness that is unscientific and unsatisfactory. We have no absolute criteria of feeble-mindedness. In the definition generally accepted by English-speaking people, we appeal to no less than three sciences for our criteria. Our accepted definition reads, "a person of defective mentality (psychology) existing from birth or an early age (biology) whereby he is incapable of competing in the struggle for existence or of managing his own affairs with ordinary prudence (sociology)." Such a definition is not scientific because it is not definite. It is not satisfactory because it is not usable in all cases. It is not definite because in the first place it does not tell us what we mean by a *mental defect*. How low in the scale of intelligence must a person be in order to be a defective? We have already said that at one time we thought twelve years was the limit, but we know that most of the twelve and even the ten and the nine are not defective. Secondly, we say that such defect exists from birth and early age. Existing from birth is definite; existing from an early age is indefinite. However, in both of these cases, it would only be necessary to determine a point by common agreement as the result of study and a determination of the consequences. But the third science appealed to is more hopeless than all the rest. Who can tell exactly what we mean by being incapable of competing in the struggle for existence or of being incapable of managing his own affairs with ordinary prudence? What is ordinary prudence? What do we mean by managing his own affairs? Must he never take advice from any one? Moreover, in this case even if we could decide what we would mean by such expressions it would not remain constant even when so settled. My two-year old nephew is of

idiot level and I may call him an idiot without hurting his father's or mother's feelings provided I use the right inflection and have a twinkle in my eye. But he is not feeble-minded because he is not defective. He has all the mentality that his age calls for. If when he is three or four he still has only the mentality of two, he will be defective and it will be a mental defect that existed from an early age. So far two thirds of the definition makes him feeble-minded. But how about the third? Well, he is incapable of competing in the struggle for existence or of managing his own affairs with ordinary prudence, but that is not because of his mental defect, but because of his age. But again, suppose he is four years old with a mentality of two, still it can not be said that his inability to compete or to manage his affairs is the result of his mental defect. It is just as much the result of his chronological age. And yet such a boy would probably be diagnosed as feeble-minded. Certainly, if we adopt the I. Q. system, for his I. Q. would be only 50, well within the limits of feeble-mindedness.

Let us now assume that this boy has grown up to fifteen years of age and has a mentality of ten. He is within the moron limit for mentality, and although he is fifteen years of age he is incapable of earning his living and of managing his own affairs with ordinary prudence. He is therefore, according to all the criteria, feeble-minded. We will therefore place him in the institution for the feeble-minded for care and training. Let us say that he stays there five years. He still has the mentality of a ten-year-old boy, but in those five years he has been very carefully trained. He has learned to take care of himself, to dress and undress himself, to take care of his clothes, to keep himself decently clean. He has learned to work, he can plow and harrow and hoe corn and drive horses, he can

earn twenty or forty or perhaps fifty dollars a month at such work. He has even learned to take care of his money. In short, he is no longer incapable of competing in the struggle for existence or of managing his own affairs with ordinary prudence. Is he feeble-minded? Is he a moron? Not according to the definition. He has a mental defect because he has only ten-year mentality; the defect existed from an early age, but the rest of the definition does not apply. Was he feeble-minded when he was sent in to the institution at the age of fifteen? Certainly, according to the definition. Then he has been cured of his feeble-mindedness! That seems to be an inevitable conclusion. He was feeble-minded five years ago, but now he is not feeble-minded. But we have always said that feeble-mindedness was incurable. "Once feeble-minded always feeble-minded." We were evidently in error and yet the difficulty is more the result of our definition than anything else. The boy is just as mentally defective as he ever was. Just as feeble in mind as he was five years ago. That condition has not been changed. Yet he was not so defective and so feeble in mind that he could not be trained to become self-supporting and capable of managing his own affairs.

The reader is already asking what that hypothetical case proves. Does such a thing as this ever happen? Yes, that is the reason we are discussing it. We have not resurrected a dead issue for the sake of manifesting our marksmanship. What we have described has not only happened but is happening all the time. It has been happening for years, but we did not know it. Every institution for the feeble-minded has some inmates who are sent there as feeble-minded but who are no longer incapable of managing their own affairs. This fact has now been demonstrated to us by the work of

Superintendent Charles Bernstein, of the institution at Rome, N. Y., who has proved that these people have become capable, by actually putting them out to take care of themselves. He was careful at first to give adequate supervision until his case was proved, but there is no longer any doubt about it. Not only that, but Dr. Walter E. Fernald, late of Waverley, Massachusetts, made a careful investigation of the children who had been taken out of his institution by their friends or relatives. This investigation showed that the great majority of those who were of the moron level were getting along very satisfactorily. A similar study at the Vineland Training School shows the same results. *We are curing some feeble-minded in all our well-managed institutions*—if you choose to put it that way. It will perhaps be better to conclude that we have so trained a few of the feeble-minded that they are capable of taking care of themselves. Whatever we choose to call it, it is a fact of tremendous significance. But we must be careful that we make no mistake as to what it signifies.

First of all, some of my readers have already raised the question as to the advisability of letting these people go out into the world, even though they can support themselves. Is there not danger that they will marry and bring into the world feeble-minded children and so continue this defective race? Yes, there is considerable danger of that, *if it is a danger*. Let us look at it a little more closely. Just what is the danger? First, that we are propagating the feeble-minded. Yes, but we have learned how to "cure" them, and when cured (trained) they are very useful. They are happy in doing their kind of work that you and I do not want to do—positions that it is hard to get people to fill. In other words, *we need these people*. They are an essential element in the com-

munity. Why should we be afraid of their having children and bringing up a family like themselves? But suppose they have children that are of a lower intelligence than themselves who can not be trained, will always be a burden upon society? Yes, that would be serious. But there is no indication that that happens in any considerable number of cases. Accidents occur to all classes. Sometimes highly intelligent people have the misfortune of bringing into the world a defective child. There is no evidence that these morons would be any more unfortunate. Perhaps our ideal should be to eventually eliminate all the lower grades of intelligence and have no one who is not above the twelve-year intelligence level. Aside from the impossibility of eliminating half of the population, one may very well question whether such a thing would be desirable, even if it could be done. One thing remains to be considered, the tremendous significance of education for the moron.

The problem of the moron is a problem of education. There would be very few, if any, morons in our institutions for the feebleminded if we had not been mistaken in our theories of education. Henry Fairfield Osborn has said, "The true spirit of American democracy that all men are born with equal rights and duties has been confused with the political sophistry that all men are born with equal character and ability to govern themselves and others and with the educational sophistry that education and environment will offset the handicap of heredity." On the basis of this supposed equality, we have concluded that what is good for one is good for all in the way of education and until quite recently have insisted upon the same course of study for all children. We have now discovered our error, but we are slow to put our new knowledge into practice. The most marked psychological charac-

teristic of the moron is that he is unable to generalize, to handle abstract ideas or to use general principles. He can not handle abstractions or general principles. That being the case, it is as useless to try to teach him subjects that involve generalization and abstract ideas as it would be to train him to run a foot race if he had been born without legs. From this, it is clear to see why we have in the past turned out of our schools so many boys and girls who could not compete in the struggle for existence nor manage their own affairs with ordinary prudence. We have kept them in school and tried to teach them abstractions and general principles, things that they could never learn. The result has been that when they left school they were not only not prepared to do anything by which they could earn a living but they were *discouraged* and *disheartened* and often times *disgruntled* and *anti-social*. It can not be wondered at that many of them became delinquent and finally, criminals. Now that we have learned the facts, the solution is easy. Teach them the things they can learn instead of attempting to teach the things that they can not learn and we will send them out of school trained and even skilled in the doing of things that will enable them to compete in the struggle for existence and in habits that will insure their managing their affairs with ordinary prudence. Moreover, they will have that priceless boon which the moron of the past never did have, namely, the consciousness of *ability in some line*, the *joy of creation* and of independence.

And what kind of training is it that will produce this very desirable result? The reader who wants a complete answer to that question and a demonstration must visit the institutions for the feebleminded where that work has been and is being done. As already stated, Dr. Bernstein, at Rome, New York, has

made some of the largest and most convincing demonstrations, but the same kind of training can be seen at Vineland, New Jersey, at Letchworth Village in New York, at Waverley and Wrentham in Massachusetts—in fact, in most any of the state institutions, although some have gone much farther than others in appreciating the value of industrial training. In brief, the work consists in training these children to work and make with their hands things rather than training them to read and talk about things. These people can all be trained to work efficiently with their hands and when trained they will continue to work efficiently at the thing that they have learned. *They can never be trained to exercise judgment in critical situations.* Therefore, their work must be more or

less of a routine nature. But they are not unhappy at this. In fact, they enjoy it if they are not worked too hard and are well treated. This means that it is desirable always for some one to have a certain amount of oversight of such people; in other words, they should always be regarded more or less as children. Provision should be made for their playtime and rest as well as for their work. Our classes for backward children in the public schools have begun to work on these lines, but very few of them have been able so far to carry the plan out to its logical conclusion and to train these children to do the things in school that they are most likely to have an opportunity to do throughout life. This is the problem of the moron.